Conference was received from two countries, namely, Suriname and The Netherlands. The venue and the dates are under active consideration of the Ministry and a decision will be taken soon.

(b) It has always been the endeavour of this Ministry to provide all possible interaction between the officiaKnonofficial Hindi scholars and representatives from the concerned sectors in India and the international Hindi scholars on occasion of such international conferencesfeminars.

Increase in Passport Charges

2715. SHRI ABANI ROY: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have recently increased the passport charges;

(b) if so, the reasons and justification therefor;

(c) whether the system of issuing passports have been decentralised and made easy; and

(d) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI JASWANT SINGH): (a) Yes, sir.

(b) The passport fee was last revised in July 1993. The rising cost of issue of passports, the present and projected cost of modernisation of offices, computerisation of processes, construction and renting of new and modern office premises and for reimbursing the cost to the State Governments for accepting and scrutinising passport applications as well as the cost involved in police verification are the primary reasons for the increase in passport fee.

(c) and (d) The Government has decided to decentralise the passport services and to bring these services closer to the people. Under this scheme, the passport applicants can deposit their filled passport application forms through the designated speed post centres and the office of the District Magistrate/Superintendent of Police in every state throughout the country. It is proposed to establish

dedicated District Passport Cells in those districts where the number of applications exceeds 10,000 per year. The forms would be scrutinised and documents checked by the District Passport Cells and the speed post centres and then forwarded to the Passport Office who will issue the passports. The scheme has already been launched in Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Sikkim and Nagaland at the district level and at the designated speed psot passport collection centres throughout the country.

Afghanistan's request to raise National Army

2716. SHRIMATI VANGA GEETHA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Afghanistan has formally requested India for assistance in raising its National Army;

(b) whether Government have agreed to meet this request of Afghanistan; and

(c) if so, the details in this regard?

THE MINISTER OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI JASWANT SINGH): (a) to (c) Government of India is committed to provide humantarian relief. Project and other assistance for the rcconstrution and rchablilitation in Afghanistan. During the visit of H.E. Mr. Hamid Karzai to India, both countries identifed the areas of Health, Education, Information Technology, Industrial development, Public Transport and Training as priority areas for bilateral cooperation. We have also been an active participant in all international efforts aimed at reconstruction in Afghanistan. Government took part in an international meeting held in Geneva on 3rd April, 2002, to discuss international cooperation in raising an Afghan national army. We offered Indian capabilities for technical cooperation in this field.